The Washington merry-go-round

Jack Anderson

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WITH LES WHITTEN

WASHINGTON — When Gerald Ford tried to impeach Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas five years ago, Ford used secret data that had been slipped to him from the files of the FBI and probably the CIA.

Ford was then the House Republican leader, a loyal party man, who sometimes played a rough game of politics.

In 1969, President Nixon wanted to clean the liberals out of the Supreme Court so he could appoint conservatives in their places. With this in mind, his friend Ford began a campaign to get impeachment hearings going against Douglas.

For ammunition, Ford went to John Mitchell, who was then the attorney general. Mitchell agreed to put someone in contact with Ford.

Not long afterward, in December 1969, Asst. Atty. Gen. Will Wilson showed up at Ford's office with derogatory data about Douglas. It was based on secret intelligence reports developed by U.S. agents in the United States and the Dominican Republic from 1956 to 1964.

One suggestion, wholly false, was that Douglas had ties with the Mafia. But the reports focused on a visit by Douglas to the inauguration of Dominican President Juan Bosch on Feb. 27, 1963.

Douglas was accompanied, the agents reported, by the head of a foundation paying Douglas $1,000 a month and by a lawyer "who had represented racketeers."

To hide the source, the information was typed on plain paper with no letterhead. Ford later borrowed entire sections from the smear sheets and used them almost verbatim in a virulent anti-Douglas speech, which he delivered on the House floor on April 15, 1970.

He fobbed off the speech as the fruit of his own investigation, with no mention of his behind-the-scenes dealings with Mitchell and Wilson.

A high Justice Department official, with direct knowledge of the case, told us that most of the damaging data against Douglas came out of FBI files. Intelligence sources added that the details from the Dominican Republic were provided by the CIA.

We reached Wilson, who slipped the typed sheets to the President-to-be, in Austin, Tex. He told us that the Douglas material had been prepared from "general intelligence files," which he used to keep in the criminal division of the Justice Department.

When we pressed him, he acknowledged that the material "probably" came from the FBI, with portions "possibly" contributed by the CIA.

Footnote: Last month, Time magazine reported that Douglas had been a "target of CIA surveillance" in the 1960s "after he visited the Dominican Republic." Spokesmen for both the FBI and CIA refused any comment. The President has said he didn't know where Wilson got the material.

SEX SNOOPS: For years, we have been reporting on the snooping practices of the FBI, CIA, Secret Service and other government agencies. We have written dozens of columns laying out the facts that are now belatedly making front-page headlines.

As evidence that government gumshoes were abusing their investigative powers, our sources provided us with secret FBI files, CIA reports and Secret Service records on prominent Americans. Among them were members of Congress, black leaders, newspapermen, movie stars and football heroes.

We have noticed that the government agents spend a great deal of time observing and reporting on the sexual adventures of a wide variety of noncriminal Americans. From the quantity and detail of information, we suspect there was as much voyeurism as sleuthing in the investigations.

Here are a few examples of what we mean:

— The Watergate wiretap transcripts, still sealed by the courts, are full of sex talk. What the White House wanted to know about the Democrats, apparently, was their sex secrets. The Waterbuggers bugged the only telephone that didn't go through the Democratic headquarters switchborad. The Democrats used this phone, therefore, to make their most intimate calls.

— One FBI report on a prominent black leader contained nothing but titillating tidbits about his sex life. It told, for example, about an incident with a woman in a New York City hotel. "(He) threatened to leap from the 13th floor window of the hotel," the FBI reported solemnly, "if this woman would not say she loved him."

— An FBI report on a football star states he "has been observed intoxicated on several occasions and also reportedly had an affair with an airline stewardess who became pregnant as a result of this association."

— In the file of a religious leader, the FBI has included the allegation that "he had illicit relations with an underage girl."

— A well-known writer, according to the FBI, "was evicted by the landlord for having homosexual parties."

— A famous movie star has this report in his FBI file: "The informant states that from personal knowledge he knew that (the actor) was a homosexual."

Yet the sex lives of celebrities, quite obviously, should be none of the government's business.